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Published Version

André, A. (1993) Geoffrey of Monmouth's portrayal of the arrival of Christianity in Britain. Fact or fiction? Reading Medieval Studies, XIX. pp. 3-13. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84370/>

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Geoffrey of Monmouth's Portrayal of the Arrival of Christianity in Britain. Fact or Fiction?

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William of Newborough described Geoffrey of Monmouth as 'effrenta mentiendi libidine' (that is, as an imposter writing from an inordinate love of lying). In more modern times, Geoffrey has fared little better in the hands of R.W. Hanning, who calls him 'an unscrupulous fabricator of a legendary British past'.¹ However, I would like to suggest that an open-minded approach to a reading of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* shows that Geoffrey does not entirely deserve his reputation. By examining his portrayal of the structure of the pagan church, the arrival of Christianity in Britain, and the subsequent progress of the Christian faith, I hope to go some way towards redeeming Geoffrey's reputation, and suggest that the work does not entirely spring from his lively imagination. Instead, I maintain that, there is evidence not only that he has made use of source material, but that there is, in fact, some truth in what he has written.

Let us begin by briefly summarising what Geoffrey says on the arrival of Christianity in Britain. He describes the pagan church as it existed in Britain before the coming of Christianity with flamens presiding over territorial districts. These in turn were answerable to arch-flamens. He then goes on to discuss how Christianity was brought to Britain during the reign of King Lucius in the second century. According to Geoffrey, the Christian religion then flourished until the days of Asclepiodotus, when the Diocletian persecutions began. During this time churches were destroyed, copies of the Holy Scriptures were burnt in market places and priests were butchered. However, the heroism of the martyrs ensured that Christianity did not die out completely.

Geoffrey mentions Christianity again when he talks of the Pelagian heresy and the way that the true faith was restored by Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre, and Lupus, Bishop of Troyes. However progress is by no means smooth, and during the reign of Vortigern, the Saxons drive him out of his kingdom, lay waste the countryside and virtually destroy Christianity once more. Even after the church was restored by Aurelius, the faith was tainted by corruption, and Pope Gregory sent Augustine to Britain to preach Christianity to the Angles who had lapsed back into paganism.

It has to be admitted that there are occasions when Geoffrey uses his descriptions of religion to reveal his own political sympathies. One example of this occurs earlier in the *Historia*, before the coming of Christianity. Geoffrey describes the war between the Greeks and the Trojans, and Antigonus and his comrade Anacletus are captured. Anacletus is persuaded by Brutus to act as a traitor and deceive his own countrymen. A.J.P. Tatlock points out in 1931 that this episode is a piece of political propaganda on Geoffrey's part.² Anacletus' name is almost certainly an allusion to Petrus Petri Leonis, who came to England as Cardinal Legate in 1121 and visited the king in Wales, and the convent in Canterbury. He travelled in great pomp, gained a large amount of loot, and then left the country, having made promises to Canterbury that he could not keep. He was then elected pope and changed his name to Anacletus. Innocent II however, was elected by another group, and he was ultimately successful in gaining the papacy, so, by giving a traitor the name of Anacletus, Geoffrey is showing loyalty to the 'right' pope.

Geoffrey also tends to place bishoprics in towns where we have no historical proof of their existence, for propaganda reasons. For example, the passage:

Post hec conuocatis ducibus decernere precepit quid de
Hengisto ageretur. Aderat Eldalus Claudiocestris episcopus,
frater Eldol, uir summe prudentie et religionis.

[Next he called his leaders together and ordered them to decide what should be done with Hengist. Among those present was Eldadus, Bishop of Gloucester, the brother of Eldol, and a man of the greatest wisdom and piety.]³

shows us that Eldadus, the monk who says the last rites over the Britons treacherously murdered by Hengist, and who is renowned for wisdom and piety, is bishop of Gloucester - 11 years before one existed historically. As Robert of Gloucester was Geoffrey's patron, it seems likely that Geoffrey was indulging in some flattery.

It is even more significant that Geoffrey almost completely ignores Canterbury, and instead, Caerleon appears as the pre-eminent see with the most distinguished incumbents. Its archbishop carries out the important task of crowning Arthur in Silchester, and again at the Whitsun court at Caerleon. Some scholars believe that Geoffrey, as a Welshman, was asserting claims that the Welsh church should be free from the jurisdiction of Canterbury. But it has also been pointed out that Geoffrey does not devote a great deal of attention to St David's, which would have been the logical head of a Welsh Church. It is therefore quite likely that we are seeing an example of Geoffrey's sense of humour here, and he is actually making fun of contemporary Welsh ecclesiastical interests.

Geoffrey has also been criticised for neglecting to write of Glastonbury and the great religious houses at Durham and Westminster, and for omitting to mention the important part that monks played in the life of the country. His reference to monastic learning is somewhat cynical. In order to poison Aurelius, Eopa the pagan Saxon disguises himself as a monk learned in medicine with cropped hair and shaved beard.

Valerie Flint pointed out in 1979 that anti-monastic views would not have been uncommon in Geoffrey's time.⁴ Theobald, who taught at Oxford, and who could well have known Geoffrey, was asked by Archbishop Thurston of York whether monks should have pastoral care. He replied that they should have neither pastoral care nor tithes, as they had no rights to the public priesthood nor to public clerical status, and its rewards. He maintained that monks should withdraw from public power and revenues and live a life of self-supporting penitence. He also made some direct remarks about the pride that often lay in open charity. If Geoffrey was indeed aware of these views and agreed with them, it is not surprising that members of monastic orders do not feature highly in his work.

Up to this point, I have been discussing examples of where Geoffrey's work is influenced more by propaganda than by the truth. Let us now turn to some examples of where he makes use of source material and is more concerned with historical truth.

The following passage is taken from Book IV of the *Historia* and shows Geoffrey's description of a pagan church in Britain which was established before the arrival of Christianity.

Hos etiam ex precepto apostolici ydolatriam eriperunt et ubi erant flamines episcopos, ubi archiflamines archiepiscopos posuerunt. Sedes autem archiflaminum in nobilibus tribus ciuitatibus fuerant, Londoniis uidelicet atque Eboraci et in Urbe Legionum.

[At the Pope's bidding, the missionaries converted these men from their idolatry. Where there were flamens, they placed bishops, and where there were archflamens they appointed archbishops. The seats of the archflamens had been in three noble cities, London, York and the City of Legions.]⁵

The country was divided into twenty eight territorial divisions, each of these being presided over by a flamen. Over these flamens were 3 archflamens. S. Williams points out in 1952 that the *False Decretals of Pseudo-Isidore* show that the pagan church had consisted of a carefully organised territorial state with powerful hierarchies.⁶ This work had been written in the 9th century to prove that the pagans had a fully-fledged ecclesiastical organisation before the birth of Christ. Likewise, Anselm's *Collectio Canonum* provides the same picture, and Williams believes that Geoffrey could well have had access to this work. So we can see in this instance that Geoffrey was not merely using his own imagination but was using source material.

Geoffrey describes the coming of Christianity to Britain in the reign of King Lucius in the second century. We can see that Lucius was inspired with a desire for the true faith after having seen the miracles that had been performed by young Christian missionaries. He therefore wrote to Pope Eleutherius and asked to be received into the Christian faith. The pope sent Faganus and Duvianus, two learned religious men, who baptised Lucius and the people of the neighbouring tribes. In Geoffrey's words:

Exitum quoque suum preferre uolens principio epistulas suas Eleutero pape direxit petens ut ab eo christianitatem reciperet ... Siquidem beatus pontifex comperta eius deuotione duos

religiosos doctores Faganum et Duuianum ... abluerunt ipsum baptismate sacro et ad Christum conuerterunt.

[(Lucius) sent a letter to Pope Eleutherius to ask that he might be received by him in the Christian faith ... The holy father, when he heard of the devotion of Lucius sent him two learned doctors, Faganus and Duvianus ... who converted Lucius and washed him clean in holy baptism.]⁷

The pagan temples were dedicated to God and the saints, and the flamens were replaced by bishops and the arch-flamens by archbishops. There were 28 bishops who were under the jurisdiction of 3 archbishops who had seats in London, York and Caerleon.

We have to admit that, historically, much of this account is probably untrue, although the exact date and circumstances of the introduction of Christianity to Britain are agreed to be unknown, and it is therefore always possible that Geoffrey may have more facts behind him than we are giving him credit for. Indeed, Petrie, writing in 1917, suggests that there is some plausibility in Geoffrey's account.⁸ He asserts that a certain Bran was a hostage in Rome for 7 years in Caesar's household before the reign of Lucius. As the *Epistle to the Romans* was written in 58 AD, Christianity would have been a strong element in Caesar's household and it is not improbable that Bran would have been converted. Lleury, Bran's great great grandson gave lands and the privileges of freemen to those who dedicated themselves to the faith of Christ. The description of Lucius' reign follows this episode, and it is therefore plausible that Lucius gained his knowledge of miracles performed by Christian missionaries from those areas of Britain. Modern historians tend to disagree with Petrie's account, and it is generally believed that Christianity was an idea introduced by traders. However, this does not mean that the episode was merely from Geoffrey's imagination.

The story of the Lucian conversion is found in both Bede and Nennius. In Chapter 4 of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* we learn that Lucius wrote to the holy Eleutherius and asked to be made a Christian under his direction. This request was quickly granted and the Britons received the faith, maintaining it undisturbed until the persecutions during the reign of the Emperor Diocletian. Other scholars have suggested that Geoffrey's sources for these events might also include

the Latin *Annales Cambriae*, some Welsh royal genealogies, the *Life of St David*, and other *Lives* of 6th century Celtic saints.

C.N.L. Brooke provides us with further evidence for the existence of Duvianus and Faganus.⁹ He tells us that between 1125 and 1130, the Chapter of St Andrew and St David addressed a letter to Pope Honorius II asserting that their church had been metropolitan since the days of Pope Eleutherius who sent Fagan and Duvian and founded bishoprics and three archbishoprics. It is possible that Geoffrey knew this letter and used it as one of his sources. More evidence for their existence is found in the Welsh *Brut Tysilio* in which they appear as Dyvan and Fagan, and churches dedicated to them were known in Geoffrey's time and in his district, within eight miles south and west of Llandaff.

Geoffrey's account of the Diocletian persecutions also deserves notice. In section 77 of the *Historia* we read:

Superuenerat Maximianus Herculus, princeps milicie predicti tyranni, cuius imperio omnes subuerse sunt ecclesie et cuncte sacre scripture que inueniri poterant ... Inter ceteros utriusque sexus summa magnanimitate in acie Christi perstantes passus est Albanus Uerolamius, Iulius quoque et Aaron Urbis Legionis ciues ... martyrii tropheo conuolauerunt.

[Maximinianus Herculus, the general commanding the tyrant's armies, came over to Britain. By his orders all the churches were knocked down, and all copies of the Holy Scriptures which they could discover were burnt ... Among the people of either sex, who with the greatest possible courage, stood firm in the battle-line for Christ were Albanus who suffered at St Albans, and Julius and Aaron, two of the townsfolk of the city of the Legions ... bearing with them the crown of martyrdom.]¹⁰

There is some authenticity in this account. The martyrdom of Saint Alban is accepted as fact, and both Gildas and Bede discuss the Diocletian persecutions. Bede tells us that Diocletian ordered that all churches must be destroyed and all Christians hunted out and killed. These orders were carried out without respite for ten years, with

churches being burnt, innocent people outlawed, and martyrs slaughtered.

Geoffrey goes on to describe the restoration of the true faith during the reign of Vortigern:

In tempore illo uenit sanctus Germanus Altissiodorensis episcopus et Lupus Trecacensis ut uerbum Dei Britonibus predicarent. Corrupta namque fuerat christianitas eorum tum propter paganos tum propter Pelagianam heresim cuius uenenum ipsos multis diebus affecerat. Beatorum igitur uirorum predicatione restituta est inter eos uere fidei religio quia multis miraculis cotidie preclarebant.

[It was at this time that St Germanus, the Bishop of Auxerre, came, and Lupus, Bishop of Troyes, with him to preach the word of God to the Britons: for their Christian faith had been corrupted not only by the pagans but also by the Pelagian heresy, the poison of which had infected them for many a long day. However, the religion of the true faith was restored to them by the preaching of these saintly men. This they made clear almost daily by frequent miracles.]¹¹

We can see that the true faith was restored successfully because of the miracles performed by these men.

Both Bede and Augustine testify that Pelagius came to Britain. He preached that there was no moral difference between the clergy and the laity, and the true Christian way of life lay in the renunciation of riches. Three things should be found in the character of every Christian - knowledge, faith and obedience. By knowledge we recognise God, by faith we believe in Him, and by obedience we serve Him. Pelagius was more concerned with Christian living than with abstract problems of theology. The main dispute between Pelagius and Augustine arose over sin. Pelagius maintained that sin was a quality to be discerned in individual actions when a human being is imitating Adam, rather than a 'substance' which could be handed on to act upon human nature. The opponents of Pelagius argued that these views denied the necessity of the Cross, because if mankind's sin was not solid, but atomic, there could be no single solid act of redemption for mankind as a whole. It was certainly true that the Cross was not central to Pelagius' teaching. He saw Jesus as an example of human

perfection, providing Christians with an example of how life should be lived, rather than God confronting sin. Pope Celestine regarded Britain as a stronghold of this heresy, and in 429 he sent Saint Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre as his own representative, to uproot the evil.¹² So here again, we find that Geoffrey's account bears some resemblance to the truth.

Section 188 of the *Historia* concerns Geoffrey's mention of Augustine's mission:

Postquam ergo uenit Augustinus, inuenit in eorum prouintia vii episcopatus et archiepiscopatum religiosissimis presulibus munitos et abantias complures in quibus grex Domini rectum ordinem tenebat.

[When Augustine arrived he found seven bishoprics and an archbishopric in the Britons' territory, all of them occupied by most devout prelates. There were also seven abbeys and in them God's flock observed a seemly rule.]¹³

Geoffrey's narrative goes on to concentrate on the war between the Bishop of Bangor, who refused to co-operate with Augustine, and Ethelbert of Kent and his followers. Augustine's mission is given no further discussion.

It is accepted as historically true that Augustine landed in Britain on the Isle of Thanet in Kent in the year 597, and in 601 was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury. This centralised order was to supersede the Celtic order, and it was the duty of the Canterbury church to establish unity throughout the British church and convert the Saxon kingdoms that remained heathen. This event is mentioned in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle for 596, which states 'in this year Pope Gregory sent Augustine to Britain with a good number of monks, who preached God's word to the English people'.¹⁴

The fact that Geoffrey often refers to paganism remaining in the British church is also born out by historical evidence. In 601, Mellitus brought a letter from the Pope to St Augustine saying that Pagan temples should not be destroyed, but only the idols which they housed. The buildings themselves were to be purified and altered to be made fit for the service of God. Sacrifices of animals could be continued as a means of providing good cheer for Christian festivals. A generation later, similar instructions were given by Pope Boniface to Edwin of

Northumbria, and even then Paganism was not entirely destroyed. The first formal edict ordering the destruction of idols throughout the Kentish realm was not issued until nearly the middle of the seventh century.

Dubricius is the most important Welsh saint to feature in the *Historia*. In Section 130, Geoffrey says of him:

(Aurelius) concessi[t] Eboracum Sansoni, illustri uiro summaque religione famoso; Urbem uero Legionum Dubritio quem diuina prouidentia in eodem loco profuturum elegerat.

[(Aurelius) gave York to Samson, a most distinguished man, who was famous for his great piety. The City of the Legions he bestowed upon Dubricius, whom divine providence had already singled out as one suitable for promotion there.]¹⁵

He later appears as Archbishop of Urbs Legionum and the primate of the land. He crowns Arthur, and makes a rousing speech to the Britons before the Battle of Bath, telling them that whoever dies for the sake of his brothers and his countrymen is following in the footsteps of Christ Himself. He is said to be so pious that his prayers were sufficient in themselves to cure any sick man. After Arthur's crowning at Caerleon, Dubricius resigns from his office as Archbishop to live as a hermit.

R.H. Fletcher explains in 1966 that this material is from Welsh tradition, and Dubricius features in the *Vita Samsonis*, which is the earliest surviving life of a Celtic saint.¹⁶ Geoffrey indeed mentions Samson as Archbishop of Dol, which is in accordance with Breton tradition, as he is regarded as the patron saint of Brittany and the first archbishop of Dol. Samson's successor at Dol is Teliaus, and it has been suggested that this is the Latin form of Teilo, who appears in the *Life of Teilo*, which is part of the *Book of Llan Dav*. Here it is said that when the Saxons were devastating the island, Teilo went to Armorica, and was joyfully received there by Samson.

Other characters Geoffrey mentions in passing who have some historical authenticity, include Piramus, Arthur's chaplain, who is made Archbishop of York. It is believed that Piramus is a mistaken spelling for Piranus, to whom Cornish chapels were dedicated. Geoffrey would have known of him as a fairly important saint in the Celtic church. St Helen is also mentioned, although Geoffrey presents

her as a beautiful and accomplished British princess, and he ignores the most celebrated event in her history, which is her discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem.

To conclude this paper, I would admit that we cannot take Geoffrey too seriously as a historian, and we have seen that much of what he says is written with a political motive. However, Julia Crick is perhaps being a little unfair when she describes the *Historia* as 'a pseudo-history in historical clothing'.¹⁷ There is, in fact, a surprising amount of evidence that, in his depiction of the coming of Christianity, Geoffrey makes use of a considerable amount of source material, and does not merely make use of his own imagination. Furthermore, his writing does contain an unexpected degree of accuracy. Geoffrey only mentions religion occasionally, and rarely goes into great detail, and I believe that it is possible that he should be taken more seriously when he does mention religion, as at such times he is more at pains to write what he considers to be the truth. His reputation throughout history as a liar, is therefore not always justified, and his account of the arrival of Christianity shows both fact and fiction.

NOTES

¹ R.W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: from Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth*, (New York 1966), p.122.

² A.J.P. Tatlock, 'Certain Contemporaneous Matters in Geoffrey of Monmouth', *Speculum*, VI (1931), 221-223.

³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britannie*, ed. N. Wright, (Cambridge 1985), p.88, section 125. Hereafter cited as *HRB*. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe, (Harmondsworth 1966), p.193, section viii. Hereafter cited as Thorpe.

⁴ V.J. Flint, 'The *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose, a Suggestion', *Speculum*, LIV (1979), 466-467.

⁵ *HRB*, p.46, section 72. Thorpe, p.125, section iv.

⁶ S. Williams, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Canon Law', *Speculum*, XXVII (1952), 186-187.

⁷ *HRB*, p.46, section 72. Thorpe, pp.124-125, section iv.

⁸ F. Petrie, 'Neglected British History', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, VIII (1917-1918), 216 ff.

⁹ C.N.L. Brooke, *Studies in the Early British Church* (Cambridge 1958), pp.207 ff.

¹⁰ *HRB*, p.50, section 77. Thorpe, pp.130-131, section v.

¹¹ *HRB*, p.68, section 100. Thorpe, p.160, section v.

¹² J. Ferguson, *Pelagius* (Cambridge 1956), pp.145 ff.

¹³ *HRB*, p.135, section 188. Thorpe, p.266, section vi.

¹⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. D. Whitlock et al (London 1961), p.14.

¹⁵ *HRB*, p.92, section 130. Thorpe, p.198, section viii.

¹⁶ R.H. Fletcher, *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles* (Boston 1966), p.77.

¹⁷ Julia C. Crick, *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth. IV. Dissemination and Reception in the later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge 1991), p.196.